**Stakeholder Engagement in Publicly Funded Museums.
Outlining the theoretical context and a proposal for future research.**

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Abstract

This paper outlines the central issues surrounding stakeholder engagement in publicly funded museums asking what is it, who should be involved and why it is done. It will explore the theoretical background to the topic by reviewing the literature on stakeholder, democratic and decision making theories. It will conclude by proposing a research question and sketching out a methodology for the research.

Introduction

This article outlines the central issues surrounding stakeholder engagement in publicly funded museums in order to establish a theoretical framework from which to research stakeholder engagement in museums. The article approaches the topic from a management and cultural policy perspective and it examines the relevant literature from stakeholder, democratic and decision making theories. It looks at the nature and classification of stakeholder engagement and discusses some reasons why museums might seek to engage their stakeholders. By reviewing the literature it will identify gaps in the current literature and then move on to propose a research question, define key terms and suggest a methodology for the proposed research.

Context

In recent years there has been an increasing emphasis on how organisations communicate and involve their stakeholders. This increase in stakeholder engagement has been noted by a number of academic writers (Vigoda, 2002; Newman et al, 2004; Irvin and Stansbury, 2004; Jepson, 2005; Cooper et al, 2006; Ansell and Gash, 2007; Bovaird, 2007; Bayley and French, 2007 and Poister and Thomas, 2007). It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the reasons for this increase however it is worth noting that it appears to be linked to wider social, technological and political changes. The most significant of these allow information to be shared more quickly and more widely coupled with the evolving attitudes towards democracy and authority.

Stakeholder engagement is not the exclusive domain of the public sector nor is it particularly new. However it has been give new impetus in the public sector by the concepts of public value (Moore, 1995) and New Public Management (NPM) (Barzelay, 2001).   Nor is it confined to Britain; many countries have experienced an increased interest in stakeholder engagement over the last decade. While much of the literature discussed in this paper is from North America this may reflect where the academic interest is rather than the pattern of stakeholder activity worldwide. There is a body of relevant material from a British context but there are fewer examples of it (Newman et al, 2004; Holden, 2004 and 2006; Bovaird, 2007). There are indications that some sectors have been more

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enthusiastic about involving stakeholders than others, for example there appear to be more examples of stakeholder involvement in environmental management (e.g. Warner, 1997 and Lee, 2003) and in health and welfare (e.g. Grant et al, 2006 and Martin, 2008) than other sectors. In the cultural sector much of the debate has focused on the concept of cultural value (Hewison and Holden, 2004; Holden, 2004 and 2006). Holden and Hewison's emphasis has been on how engagement with the public might enhance both the legitimacy and accountability of publicly funded culture.

The nature and classification of engagement

Engagement includes a wide spectrum of activities all of which involve communication between an organisation and stakeholder(s) and some of which involve shared decision making. More clarification is needed in the terminology used since writers use different phrases to describe what I considered to be engagement.   Particular phrases are more fashionable in certain milieus, for example, "engagement" and "consultation" are popular in contemporary British political circles while "public participation" prevails in recent academic literature. Some writers use different words to describe different kinds of engagement and others use these words interchangeably, which adds to the ambiguity. In the museum sector the term engagement is often used to describe activities aimed at making connections between people and the collections (e.g. Black, 2005) but it can mean more than this, for example working with the community to co-produce exhibitions (e.g. Bruce and Hollows, 2007). The table below indicates some of the words and phrases used in the relevant literature.

Table 1 – Engagement Terminology

Word or phrase	Writers who use it
collaborative governance	Ansell and Gash, 2007; Newman et al, 2004 and Lee, 2003
user and community co-production	Bovaird, 2007
citizen participation	Stewart, 2007; Vigoda-Gadot and Mizrahi, 2007; Irvin and Stansbury, 2004; Arnstein, 1969
extra electoral participation	Stewart 2007
public participation	Daley, 2008; Martin, 2008; Fung, 2006; Wang and Wart, 2007; Bentley, 2005 and Newman et al, 2004
participatory management	Warner 1997
partnership	Vigoda, 2002; Arnstein, 1969
consultation	Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008; Cabinet Office, 2004 and Arnstein, 1969
public involvement	Grant et al 2006
citizen involvement	Yang and Callahan, 2007
community involvement	Home Office, 2004
community engagement	Home Office, 2007
stakeholder engagement	Greenwood, 2007
public engagement	NMDC, 2004; Horner et al, 2006 and Holden , 2006
civic engagement	Cooper et al, 2006
visitor / user / client and / or stakeholder engagement	Black, 2005 and Bruce and Hollows, 2007

Given the breadth of the activities engagement encompasses it is useful to understand how others have attempted to order this kind of behaviour according to the power to make decisions. Arnstein (1969) sets out eight "rungs" of participation in three distinct tiers, i.e. non-participation, tokenism and citizen power. Using Arnstein's groupings as a base Stewart (2007) suggests a hierarchy that classes engagement as informative, consultative and delegative. These divisions offer a helpful framework within which to arrange examples of engagement that are likely to be found in museums, (figure 2).

Table 2 Examples of engagement likely to be found in museums

Level of engagement	Examples of engagement
Delegative Deepest kind of engagement. Two way communication. The public (at least some people) have an element of decision making power. Representation on the board	• Some citizen panels • Voting in membership organisations • Jointly managed community projects
Consultative Two way communication but without any commitment to heed what the public say. All decision making power rests with the public body.	• Focus groups • Surveys • Feedback forms • Advisory users groups • Electronic forums
Informative One way communication. All decision making power rests with the public body.	• Public meetings • Media stories • Advertising • Publicity material • Exhibitions • Lobbying

At the lower end of the ladder or hierarchy both Arnstein and Stewart tend to see information flowing from the organisation to the stakeholders. This means that they underplay lobbying activities, for instance a historical society might campaign for a museum to accept a particular collection or to create an exhibition on a cherished topic.   In addition there is a tendency in some material (e.g. Arnstein, 1969) to view the process as adversarial with the stakeholders taking power from the almighty organisations. While it may be true in some situations, others embody a positive relationship. As Vigoda (2002) suggests the nature of the relationship is a continuum at one end the organisation could be coercive and at the other end citizens could be coercive but in between there can be various degrees of delegation, responsiveness and partnership.   Bovaird (2007) points out the potential for complex relationships between the organisation and stakeholders as well as between stakeholders. To add to the complexity stakeholders can be involved in multiple levels of engagement, e.g. a friends' organisation might be represented on the board of a charitable museum (delegative) while at the same time contributing expertise to an exhibition (informative).

Who is a stakeholder?

Mitchell et al (1997) offer a list of 27 definitions of a stakeholder, including a widely used one; "A stakeholder in an organisation is (by definition) any groups or individual who can affect or who is affected by the achievement of an organisation's objectives", Freeman (1984).   Other writers use different definitions, Clarkson (1995), for instance, narrows Freeman's definition by saying that a stakeholder must have invested some kind of capital, human or financial, in the firm and therefore has something to lose. Without the risk of losing something valuable there is no stake, he reasons. Some definitions refer to legitimacy, for example, "Persons or groups with legitimate interests in procedural and / or substantive aspects of corporate identity." Donaldson & Preston (1995). This requires qualification because there may well be disagreement about what and who is legitimate. Mitchell et al (1997) and Greenwood (2007) both explore what gives stakeholders legitimacy. Greenwood's model of the moral treatment of stakeholders might be used to discuss the legitimacy of various stakeholders in the proposed research.

Why should museums engage with stakeholders?

A weakness of much of the literature is that it assumes that stakeholder engagement is a good thing in itself (e.g. Arnstein, 1969, Bentley, 2005). The presumption that all engagement is good helps to explain the paucity of literature dealing with the rationale for engagement.   This received wisdom has been criticised notably by Stewart (2007) and Fung (2006). Some writers are explicit about the rational for stakeholder engagement; this is the case with much of the recent British literature dealing with publicly funded cultural organisations (Hewison and Holden, 2004, Holden, 2004 and 2006 and Horner et al, 2006). Here the emphasis is firmly on accountability and legitimacy, which is undoubtedly a reflection of the public value and NPM agendas. These reasons will be discussed below with an additional one, improving decision making. Comparatively little has been written about the role of stakeholder engagement in decision making, notable exceptions include Bayley and French (2007) who suggest that the more information managers have the better their decision making process and Irvin and Stansbury (2004) who question whether stakeholder engagement necessarily improves decisions about public policy.

Accountability

New public management stresses the importance of accounting for the use of public funds. The difficulty in recording the outcomes of museums has been noted by various writers (Scott, 2006, MLA 2006, Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, 2007, Holden, 2006). While it is not only museums that find it hard to create meaningful performance indicators it does seem to be particularly difficult for organisations whose most valuable outcomes are subjective and intangible (Gray, 2002 and Bird et al, 2005).   The Department of Culture Media and Sport and local authorities in charge monitoring the performance of museums continue to rely on easier to quantify measures, such as the number of visitors. There has been a reaction to this very narrow view of museum performance and involving stakeholders in judging the quality and value of museums has found a number of

advocates (Hewison and Holden, 2004; Holden 2004 and 2006). The Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA, 2006) commissioned research into this area and developed generic learning outcomes, (MLA, no date). Generic learning outcomes (GLOs) are a valiant attempt to record the impact of museum exhibitions and events on learning in a systematic way by gathering the opinions of participants before and after a museum visit, event or project. Surveying visitors and asking for feedback on various aspects of the museum can be used to improve accountability. Engagement with stakeholders in this way can help to measure the worth of museums and in doing so help to account for the public money used. This is likely to be one reason why those in charge of museums seek to engage with their stakeholders.

Legitimacy

One argument for increased engagement with stakeholders is that it fills a "democratic deficit" (Holden 2006 and Horner et at 2006) thereby increasing the legitimacy of the museums decisions. Legitimacy is the legal and moral right to act, and in democracies such as Britain it is based on consent. Voting is one way to find out if consent has been given but it is not the only way. Horner et al (2006) argue that the public manager needs to engage with the public in order to find out what they value given that without such engagement, the actions and decision of public bodies lack legitimacy. This begs a number of questions.

First; do public bodies such as museums need more democratic approval? It only makes sense if one accepts a particular definition of democracy. Democratic theory offers a number of different concepts of democracy and there is a considerable amount of debate about exact definitions. Box et al (2001) argue that in the 20th century Americans have come to accept the procedural view of democracy associated with classic liberalism, i.e. the role of a citizen is to vote for a representative and then stand back. They do not consider this to be a desirable situation and would prefer to see what they call a substantive democracy, one in which citizens are more actively involved via a collaborative relationship with public administrators. Their position is similar to the British writer Holden (2004 and 2006) and his colleague at Demos, Bentley (2005). They regard increased public participation as necessary to renew democracy and, Holden argues, that more public engagement is necessary for the legitimacy of publicly funded culture.

On the other hand, Walters et al (2000), and others who advocate a representative democracy, the public are not always the best people to make decisions in the public sector. Rather a properly qualified public servant who has been appointed through a fair and transparent process might be the best person to make the decision. In addition, if we accept that the legitimacy of decisions in the public sector would be improved by involving citizens more in museums then it follows that it would enhance the legitimacy of decisions in all other public services, including defence spending and national security. An advocate of direct democracy might agree with this logic but it is doubtful that many British politicians would.

Second; does engaging with stakeholders necessarily improve the democratic legitimacy? Why does engagement with stakeholders offer more legitimacy than the number of people who vote with their feet and visit museums? There is a risk that, by engaging with some stakeholders and not others, the museums widen, rather than reduce, the "democratic deficit". This raises the issue of the moral legitimacy of various stakeholders discussed by Greenwood (2007) and the empirical concerns that those who are well educated and well connected are more likely to become involved than those who are disadvantaged or disconnected. Whatever is done it appears that some individuals get two bites of the democratic cherry while others are excluded. These are not reasons to avoid engaging with stakeholders but they weaken claims that increased engagement results in greater democratic legitimacy.

Third; are there other, perhaps better sources of legitimacy for publicly funded museums?   For example, Newman et al (2004) offer professional knowledge and managerial authority as sources of legitimacy. A parallel might be made with universities, on the whole, universities are seen as legitimate largely because of their expertise and apparent independence even though they rely heavily on public funding.

The debate is muddled by two factors. To begin with contemporary democracy is a contested concept which makes is difficult to clarify key terms such as legitimacy. Secondly one wonders whether the call for greater public involvement in culture has less to do with filling a "democratic deficit" and more to do with winning current arguments for increased funding for culture. The comparative lack of academic investigation in the cultural policy field and, consequently, the reliance on grey literature from think tanks and consultants (Hewison and Holden 2004; Bentley, 2005; Holden 2004 and 2006; Horner et al 2006, Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, 2007) may encourage this kind of advocacy. There may be good reasons to involve stakeholders but increasing the legitimacy of the organisation may not the most obvious one.

Improved decision making

Engaging stakeholders in publicly funded museums provides staff with information about the museums audience, potential audience and operating environment. This data can inform decisions about the museum. Bayley and French (2007) suggest that stakeholder engagement can increase the quality of the decision making process, although they make it clear that their claim is that the process, rather than the outcome, of decisions is improved. It is also possible that engaging with stakeholders could help museums to avoid groupthink (Whyte, 1952 and Janis, 1972) since outsiders maybe more able to challenge the practices of a cohesive group of like minded people. It follows that engaging with stakeholders should result in better decisions, which in turn result in better museums. Of course there are difficulties in establishing what "improved" means and in demonstrating the links between action and outcome. However, the prospect of improved decision making is as valid a reason to engage with stakeholders as accountability or legitimacy.   To set this issue in a theoretical perspective I will look, briefly, at some decision making theories. I will go on to

propose that particular decision making theory offers a reasonable framework for analysing the proposed research.

Decision making is a very complex process and almost all the theories over simplify it. This complexity presents serious methodological challenges making empirical research difficult because there are so many variables. Rather than embrace the complexity many theories focus on a particular aspect of the phenomena, such as individual cognitive styles (e.g. Franco and Meadows, 2006), in doing so miss the interactive and messy nature of decision making. This tendency is compounded by the dominant faith in rationality in decision making theories.

Some of the older, more traditional, theories assume that the decision makers are essentially rational and make choices to maximise utility (e.g. Dewey, 1910). There are three main problems with these kind of theories, first people are unlikely to have all the necessary information to make such a choice, second, even if we possessed all the information, it is debatable whether we have the mental capacity to use it to maximise our utility and third it fails to take into account non-rational factors. Bounded rationality (Simon, 1960) takes some of these criticisms on board. Instead of hyper rational economic man Simon assumed administrative man who made "good enough" choices based on the limited information that was available. This is clearly an improvement but the theory still assumes people would make choices in as rational way as the information allows. Other theorists have adapted these ideas to take into account the social behaviour while maintaining a belief in rational decision making, for example, game theory (von Neumann and Morgenstern, 1944) explores how people and groups make strategic choices to maximise their return whether the return is money, power or some other form of capital. Other work recognises the complexities of decision making but still clings to a rational approach for example, multiple criteria decision making (Dyer and Forman, 1992, Belton and Stewart, 2002) and analytic hierarchy process (Saaty,1990). This faith in rationality can, and has been challenged, for instance Mumby and Putnam (1992) put forward a feminist critic of bounded rationality and argue that the dichotomy between rational and emotional is unhelpful.

The majority of decision making theories fail to explain how decisions are made. Their failure is largely due to oversimplification and an over emphasis on rationality. However, Charles Lindblom (1959 and 1988) offers a potentially useful theoretical framework. His ideas on decision making challenge the highly rational approach of many other theorists by arguing that political negotiation is an essential part of the process. He recognises the need for managers to accommodate the multiple values of a range of interested parties. Furthermore, he suggests that this was not necessarily a bad thing and that "muddling through", as he calls it, might be the best way to manage. He is often described as an incrementalist, the label coming from his idea that our mental capacity means that we can only make decisions in small increments and these build up to larger changes. Lindblom focused on decision making in the public sector which is appropriate for the proposed research. As other research has show (e.g. Nutt, 2005) there can be differences in decision making between public and private organisations.

The structure of the proposed research -

The preceding sections review relevant literature in order to locate the proposed research in existing academic theory. This section will indicate how the proposed research might be conducted to address the research question – what is the nature and value of stakeholder engagement in publicly funded museums? This section will explore a number of methodological issues starting with the underlying philosophical approach to the research. It will go on to outline a definition of a publicly funded museum and explain who might be considered a stakeholder since these issues are fundamental to selecting the research sample. A case study methodology is proposed but the details of data collection and analysis are not discussed.

The research perspective

This research explores some complex concepts, such as legitimacy, democracy and the moral claims of stakeholders. I believe that these concepts evolve over time and are defined by the socio-historic contexts of individuals. I also assume that some things are independent of individual perceptions and can be quantified, for instance visitor numbers, allocation of budgets and the location of suppliers. My philosophical approach can be described as critical realism (Bhaskar, 1998) and this informs the research design.

Defining publicly a funded museum

Twenty five years ago museums were categorised according to their governance and funding into national, local authority, university and charitable museums. However, these days most museums have a diverse range of income sources and defining what a publicly funded museum is not straightforward. If tax concessions for charitable museums are included in the calculation almost all museums receive some money from the state. A number of local authority museums have become charitable trusts but continue to receive the bulk of their funding from the local authority, e.g. Glasgow and Luton museum services. National museums receive a substantial proportion of their budget from national government the proportion is much less than it used to be, for example in 06 / 07 the Victoria and Albert Museum received only 56% of its budget from national government (V&A, 2007). Increasingly museums are becoming hybrids earning money from trading activities, private donations, and grants from charitable trusts as well as public sources. This research defines a publicly funded museum as one that receives more than 50% of its total budget from either local or national government.

Defining a museum stakeholder

As discussed above stakeholder theory provides some useful guidance on who might be considered a stakeholder. This research uses Freeman's definition of stakeholder, "A stakeholder in an organisation is (by definition) any group or individual who can affect or who is affected by the achievement of an organisation's objectives", (1984). Table 3 below lists some potential stakeholders. This list will need to be refined before data collection begins with

consideration being given to the moral claim the various stakeholders might have on the museum.

Table 3 - A list of potential museum stakeholders

Individuals	Groups
National politicians	Friends group
Local politicians	Groups that use the museum as a venue
Trustees	Local historical associations
Staff	Other museums
Volunteers	Trade unions
Visitors	Government department
Web-users	Local authority
Donors (of objects)	Grant giving charities
Donors (of funding)	Other funding bodies, e.g. Heritage Lottery Fund
Residents	Schools
Non-users	Local businesses and suppliers
Academics	
Students	

The proposed methodology

A series of case studies seems both appropriate and achievable. Case studies draw data from the real world and can take account of the complexities of social contexts. An advantage of this strong ecological validity allows for the findings of case studies to be generalised to other settings.   A good case study will gather data from a range of sources (Yin, 1994).   This research will use a variety of both qualitative and quantitive methods to gather data. It is likely to examine documentary evidence (e.g. forward plans, policy documents, media stories and publicity material) as well as gathering data from stakeholders (e.g. interviews, cognitive mapping and focus groups).
Having a number of case studies will allow for comparison between different venues although the number of case studies will be small. The aim is to create three to four case studies that are similar in a number of key respects (e.g. being publicly funded, fully accredited under the national scheme (MLA, 2007) and located in Britain) but will differ in other ways (e.g. size / number of visitors).
Having a range of data sources and a number of case studies will allow for triangulation to improve the validity of the data (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2006). Ease of access will also need to be considered since the research is expected to involve multiple visits over a period of months.

Conclusion

This article attempts to locate the proposed research in a theoretical context by drawing on democratic, stakeholder and decision making theories.
Stakeholder theory is particularly useful in defining stakeholders (Freeman,1984), assessing the relative moral claim of different stakeholders (Mitchell et al, 1997 and Greenwood, 2007) and categorising stakeholder activity (Arnstein, 1969 and Stewart, 2007) . In discussions about why museums engage, or should engage,

with stakeholders it is difficult to ignore the debates about accountability and legitimacy because they are high on the agenda and because political issues are always going to be relevant to organisations receiving public funding. However, there is a risk that these discussions obscure other relevant factors. I suspect that there are a number of reasons why museums engage with stakeholders and the more important may well be the more mundane. Stakeholders can provide crucial information to the successful running of a museum and managers need to engage with them in order to make sound decisions. Of course legitimacy and accountability are linked to decision making but they do not necessarily take precedent over it. In exploring decision making in museums Lindblom (1959 and 1988) offers the most appropriate theoretical framework. His theory was developed in the public sector and takes account of both political and management factors. There is a dearth of empirical studies on stakeholder engagement in museums. There is also a gap in the literature on the rationale for engaging with stakeholders. To date no academic research appears to have asked museums why they engage with their stakeholders or analysed how this data is used. The proposed research seeks to fill these gaps. The article has indicated the methodological approach for the research but it is recognised that more work is needed to ensure that the work contributes both to the academic theory and the practical management of publicly funded museums.

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